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ABSTRACT

The Center for Adult Education at Miami-Dade Community College (Florida) conducted a project to design a training program for adult basic education (ABE) instructors focusing on the specific skills and generic competencies that were associated with instructor success. The best source of information about the elements that constituted a successful ABE instructor was felt to be a group of ABE instructors who were perceived to be successful. "Successful" ABE instructors were nominated by administrators and other instructors to participate on a panel that was to identify and classify the skills and competencies which, in their estimation, constituted successful performance. Using the DACUM (Developing A Curriculum) process, the panel reached consensus on the following competencies and their rank order: (1) understanding the adult learner; (2) personal qualities; (3) knowledge of the field; (4) knowledge of teaching techniques; (5) creativity; (6) communication/interpersonal skills; (7) professionalism; and (8) management/organization. For each competency, specific skills were identified. An edited version of the competencies and skills served as the basis of a Delphi Questionnaire, which was mailed to 20 nationally recognized experts in the field, asking for a critical response to verify and/or supplement the list of competencies and skills. There was general agreement among the 12 respondents concerning the designation of most of the skills as "essential," "desirable," or "useful," and majority agreement about the rank order of the generic competencies. Based on panel recommendations and questionnaire responses, a list of "teachable" skills and competencies were developed, representing the elements that must be included in a training design for ABE instructors. (EJV)

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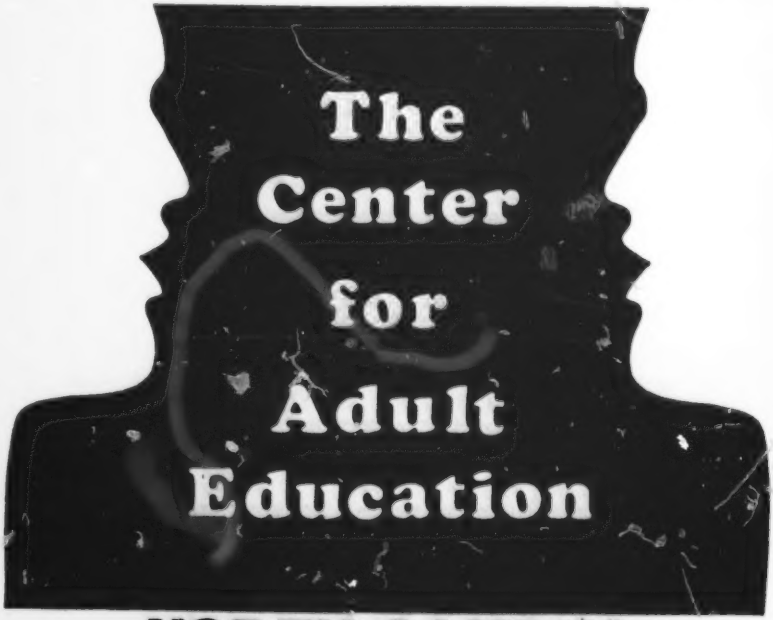
An Assessment of Competencies for Effective ABE Instruction



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ELEMENTS FOR A TRAINING DESIGN: AN ASSESSMENT OF COMPETENCIES FOR EFFECTIVE ABE INSTRUCTORS

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Elements for a Training Design: An Assessment of Competencies for Effective ABE Instructors

What elements should be included in a design for training Adult Basic Education (ABE) instructors? This paper gives our considered and provisional answer to that question in the form of a list of specific skills and generic competencies; it also provides a fairly detailed and reflective account of our progress towards compiling and classifying this list of elements.

The question itself invites a number of intelligent suggestions (see: Mocker, 1974; Smith, 1976; Burrichter & Gardner, D., 1978). It also spontaneously raises a further procedural and methodical question about the criteria which one might use in evaluating these suggestions as more or less correct. Because of the pivotal importance of this latter question to the entire project, we realized that it would be wise to answer the question about criteria first. At the outset, then, our practical intent, to write a training design, hinged on choosing some criteria for selecting the elements to be included and that implied identifying our assumptions. The selection of criteria for evaluating the elements to be included would also serve as the orientation for the project.

To answer the question about criteria, we opted for the more or less pragmatic, operative rule of practical intelligence or common sense: "nothing succeeds like success." The adoption of a common sense approach is, to be sure, to adopt a non-scientific or non-systematic stance. It should be noted, however, that common sense criteria are, nonetheless, intelligent and reasonable. Unlike the scientific hypothesis which entails a grasp of universal, abstract possibilities and their correlative instantiation in accord with idealized frequencies, the common sense hypothesis eschews both the universal and statistical aspect of the theoretical to focus on the concrete. Thus, while common sense is most at home when *applying* theoretic understanding to some particular situation, in the absence of theory common sense *repeats* what has worked effectively **without any explicit understanding of why it worked.**

Following this common sense or pragmatic approach, it seemed to us that the best source of appropriate information about the elements that constituted a "successful" ABE instructor was a group of ABE instructors who were perceived to be "successful". Once the "successful" ABE instructors were identified we could ask them to reflect on their own performance and determine what made them "successful".

1. *The Search for Successful ABE Instructors:*

In our attempt to identify successful ABE instructors, we intended to rely on the perception of local practitioners. Again, our assumption was that the recognition of successful performance in any task requires no more and no less than a common sense judgement and prescinds from all but the most commonly accepted or traditionally imparted theoretical considerations.

Accordingly, in August we contacted twenty-six administrators of Adult Education Programs in Dade County, Florida. We informed them of our project and invited them to nominate any number of ABE instructors whom they perceived to be successful and to state, if they desired, the criteria which they used in their selection.

Initial response was poor (8%); we attributed this to the August vacation period.[1] A telephone follow-up of those, who were contacted by mail but did not respond, succeeded in gathering a few more nominees. Nonetheless, we were short of the number (12-14) that we wanted to participate in the next phase of the project.

Anxiously, we contacted the nominees and asked them to nominate colleagues; they were happy to do so. By the middle of September we had a list of fifteen ABE instructors who were perceived by administrators and teachers to be "effective" and "successful".

2. *The Panel.*

The second step was to gather those who had been designated by their peers as "successful" and "effective" ABE instructors onto a panel. The task for this panel was to identify and classify the skills and competencies which, in their estimation, constituted successful performance.

To facilitate this task we utilized a process for curriculum development that has been used effectively at Daytona Beach Community College in a competency-based education program. The DACUM (Developing A CUrriculUM) process is based on three assumptions:

1) expert workers can define and describe their job more accurately than anyone else;

2) any job can be effectively described in terms of the tasks that successful workers in that occupation perform;

3) all tasks, in order to be performed correctly, demand certain knowledge and attitudes from workers (Gardner,W., 1976:1).

We agree with these three mutual assumptions and, of course, also assumed that, *mutatis mutandi*, what holds true for workers also holds true for teachers.

The panel comprised both instructors and administrators of ABE in Dade County, Florida: Ed Gehret, Mary Herr, Dona Kelley, Lorraine Miller, and Claire-Frances Whitehurst as well as Jean Naseer as recorder and ourselves as moderators.

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1. A paper delivered by Arlene Fingeret (Fingeret, 1986) argues that there is a lack of clarity among ABE instructors about their own success. If this thesis is correct, factors other than the summer vacation were involved in our initial poor response.

The early morning session was devoted to identifying the key competencies of the ABE instructor. We use the term "competency" to denote a generic name under which skills can be grouped or classified. The panel reached consensus on the following competencies as well as their rank order:

1. Understanding the adult learner.
2. Personal qualities.
3. Knowledge of field.
4. Knowledge of teaching techniques.
5. Creativity.
6. Communication/interpersonal skills.
7. Professionalism.
8. Management/organization.

The remainder of the morning session and the afternoon was devoted to identifying the specific skills which constitute successful performance and classifying these skills in accord with the above listed competencies.

Having assembled this data, we asked Mardee Jenrette, Director of Professional Development at M-DCC/North, who has had considerable experience with the DACUM process, to help us edit the material so that we might submit it to a larger group of ABE instructors and administrators for their evaluation. The complete list of skills, as edited, which specify the competencies is presented here; it should be noted that the skills, unlike the competencies, are not listed in rank order:

1. Application of knowledge about the adult learner:

a. recognizes individual differences.
b. identifies individual limitations.
c. recognizes individual vulnerabilities.
d. recognizes individual needs.
e. differentiates among individual learning styles.
f. involves adult learner in learning process.
g. incorporates life experience in teaching process.
h. accomodates to extracurricular responsibilities of students which may interfere with the learning process.
i. provides for immediacy of application.
j. distinguishes between adults and other categories.

2. Personal qualities.

a. displays patience during the learning process.
b. displays a willingness to take risks.
c. maintains an energetic and enthusiastic manner.

3. Application of Knowledge of the Field.

a. employs appropriate diagnostic/prescriptive techniques.
b. groups students according to test results.
c. uses readability scales to evaluate materials.
d. employs appropriate evaluative techniques.
e. elicits feedback.
f. writes curriculum for specific needs.

g. evaluates and adapts materials to the adult learner.
h. applies adult learning theory to instruction.

4. Teaching Techniques.
a. employs group dynamics.
b. uses A/V effectively.
c. combines techniques, as appropriate, for flexibility.
d. lectures effectively and appropriately.
e. simplifies, as needed, complex concepts.
f. relates material to life experience.
g. elicits feedback.

5. Innovation.
a. steps out of own perspective as needed.
b. uses familiar materials in innovative ways.
c. is familiar with and applies various theories on creativity.

6. Communication/interpersonal skills.
a. listens actively.
b. expresses self clearly (orally).
c. employs appropriate body language.
d. elicits responses from students.
e. compromises as appropriate.
f. writes effectively.
g. selects correct "register".

7. Professionalism.
a. follows procedures and policies.
b. is prepared for classes.
c. dresses appropriately to the situation.
d. fulfills duties and responsibilities.
e. displays leadership.
f. keeps current in field.
g. responds appropriately in situations of conflict.
h. is self-directed.
i. accepts students as adults.
j. demonstrates pride in accomplishment.

8. Management/Organization.
a. monitors and manages the classroom.
b. manages materials and supplies.
c. manages time effectively.
d. plans effective lessons.
e. manages well in crisis.
f. prioritizes information, tasks.
g. forsees consequences and plans for contingencies.

3. *The Delphi Questionnaire.*

The edited version of generic competencies and specific skills became the basis for our next step, a Delphi Questionnaire. The Delphi process was developed by the Rand Corporation in the 1950's to gain

perspective on "futures"; since the Seventies, it has been used quite effectively in the field of education. Briefly, the Delphi Process attempts to elicit both ideas and consensus from a group of experts in a given field while at the same time minimizing the emotive effects of group dynamics and the inconveniences of geographical distance. In an initial round, the experts are given a series of open-ended questions; their answers become the basis for second and subsequent rounds in which consensus about the material is reached (Brooks,1979).

In our project we used the data from our local panel in place of the initial round. We mailed out the edited version to twenty national experts. These experts were chosen from the current list of award-winning ABE centers throughout the United States; ten were selected by the U.S. Secretary for Education. To this ten we added ten more who were chosen by us from the list of Adult Education Programs used in the National Adult Literacy Project (Lerche,R.,1985); the basis for this choice was geographic proximity to the award-winning centers. It should be noted that while the Delphi process uses the same group of experts throughout, we had not only substituted the edited version of our local panel's list of competencies for the first round of Delphi, we had also substituted national experts for our local experts in the second round.

In our cover letter to these twenty experts we informed them of our project and its intent to "formulate a training design which is competency-based for Adult Basic Education instructors." We also informed them of the concrete genesis of the list of specific skills and generic competencies. We asked for their "critical response" in order to "verify and/or supplement" the results of our local panel.

Specifically, the questionnaire asked them to evaluate each of the specific skills using the following index: 1 = essential, 2 = desirable, 3 = useful, 4 = not essential, 5 = irrelevant. Twelve of the twenty responded to our questionnaire. There was general agreement in designating most of the skills as either "essential", "desirable", or "useful" with the majority designating the entire list as either "essential" or "desirable". Although fourteen of the skills received at least one negative evaluation (i.e. either "not essential" or "irrelevant"), only four received a negative evaluation by more than one expert:

	Skill	**Index x No.**
2.b.	displays a willingness to take risks.	4x3
3.b.	groups students according to test results.	4x3
4.b.	uses A/V effectively.	4x2
4.d.	lectures effectively and appropriately.	5x2, 4x1

The negative evaluations on the 1-5 index were, in several instances, supplemented by comments which questioned the specific skills value on the basis of being "falsely precise", which we interpreted to mean *too* specific.

In addition to the evaluating the specific skills, we asked our experts two questions regarding the generic competencies.[2] The first

2. Due to an oversight in proofreading, the two questions regarding the generic competency were omitted in connection with the eighth compency.

question asked whether they agreed with the rank order of the competencies as given by our local panel. Again, the majority of national experts agreed with the local experts:

Competency by Rank Order	Agreement	Disagreement	Abstention
...the adult learner	9	2	1
personal qualities	9	2	1
...in the field	9	2	1
teaching techniques	9	2	1
innovation	8	1	3
communication skills	7	2	3
management/organization	8	2	2

Also, majority agreement emerged with respect to the nomenclature assigned to describe the competency.

Competency	Agreement	Disagreement	Abstention
1	10	0	2
2	9	2	1
3	10	1	1
4	10	1	1
5	9	1	2
6	10	1	1
7	10	0	2

In our judgement, the results from the questionnaire confirmed the list developed by our local panel. Moreover, given the general agreement that emerged on the first round, we decided not to pursue complete consensus through subsequent polings.

4. *Teachable Skills.*

Now that we had what we considered to be a fairly critical list of the competencies which constitute an "effective" ABE instructor, we were faced with the question of how these generic competencies and their specific skills might be acquired. Since our intent, from the beginning, was a training design, we decided that we must restrict our consideration of the competencies to ones which we thought were "teachable". The following list of competencies and skills represent what we believe are the elements which must be included in a training design for effective ABE instructors:

1. Understanding of the Adult Learner.

1.1 is aware of ongoing research on adult development and its relationship to adults as learners.

1.2 recognizes individual learning styles and correlative teaching methods.

1.3 understands relationship between life experience of adult learner and need for immediacy of application.

1.4 incorporates life experience in learning process in order to facilitate immediacy of application.

1.5 understands the social and professional obligations/responsibilities of the adult learner and their impact on educational objectives and performance.

2. Knowledge of Field Content and Methodology.

2.1 knows content and methods in appropriate field and is capable of adapting these for adult learner.

2.2 can design and/or implement evaluative procedures which measure participant capabilities and performance.

2.3 can design and/or implement summative procedures which measure program effectiveness.

3. Employment of Teaching Techniques

3.1 knows variety of teaching/learning techniques and utilizes them in appropriate manner.

3.2 knows function of motivation in learning process and implements appropriate motivational techniques.

4. Communication Skills.

4.1 applies effectively the techniques of active listening.

4.2 can initiate dialogue and call closure on process.

4.3 uses appropriate language in oral and written expression.

5. Professionalism.

5.1 knows policies and procedures and dependably fulfills duties and responsibilities.

5.2 keeps current in field.

5.3 accepts criticism and negotiates conflict constructively.

5.4 maintains professional appearance.

6. Management of Learning Environment.

6.1 plans sessions based on learners needs and content.

6.2 manages time effectively in terms of preparation and delivery.

6.3 allocates materials and supplies in an accountable manner.

7. Interpersonal skills.

7.1 facilitates behavior which enhances self-worth of adult learner by demonstrating undertanding, empathy, and patience.

7.2 demonstrates enthusiasm and can maintain high level of energy through learning process.

7.3 instills confidence and pride in accomplishments of adult learner.

5. *Summary and Conclusion.*

We believe that we have compiled a list of elements that should be included in a training design for ABE instructors. Though we utilized designated local and national experts in the initial and intermediate phases of the process of compiling this list, we take responsibility for articulating the final list. Before concluding with some indications of how this list will be implemented in a training design, it may be helpful to review in diagram the process utilized:

Teacher Training Project	Process	Other Input
Research assumptions	Selection of "effective" ABE instructors	Nominations of "successful" ABE instructors
	↓ (common sense evaluation)	
	Local Panel	
	↓ (DACUM process)	
Editing; selection of experts	Initial List of Competencies	National experts
	↓ (Delphi process)	
	Evaluated list of competencies	
	↓	
Interpreting results	Final list of teachable competencies	

In conclusion, we believe that the list, in its final articulation, can be readily utilized in the delivery of training modules for ABE instructors. The list not only assures us of the "felt need" for such skills; by its classification of skills, it also allows for the modular development of a training program.

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